



## I.F.

By Paul Bassett Davies

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It happens to all of us in our profession, so I'm told. There's always a moment of shock, because you never remember the last time, to begin with.

It plays out something like this. You're in a garden and it's a sunny afternoon. There's a kid there, a boy of around five with a few freckles on the bridge of his nose, and he wants you to play some complicated game with him based on a TV show he's enthusiastic about, some Japanese cartoon mayhem about robots that change into other things and fight monsters or ghosts or aliens or other robots or whatever. So you go along with it, why not, he's only a kid. Then, just when you're getting into it, his mother calls him into the house. Naturally, you go inside with him. And the mother asks the kid what he's been doing, has he been playing, and he shrugs and mumbles, and she gets all cute and asks hey, have you been playing with Asquith, how is Asquith anyway? Then she turns to this other young mother type who's having coffee with her and she says, as if it's the most adorable thing in the world, isn't it funny, I don't know where he got it from, but what a strange name, don't you think, to give his imaginary friend?

Then it all comes back to you.

It's not always a kid. You'd be surprised. Maybe a guy in a suit is telling you how he lost his job, and he's not letting you get a word in. You're thinking, shit, how long do I have to listen to this idiot vent like this? Then a very thin woman shows up and says, Hi, Carl, I just heard, and not only does she ignore you but suddenly the guy who was ranting at you a moment ago ignores you too and you're like, oh, I remember, I'm not here.

That's if the adult is a new client. Sometimes you'll be hanging out with a grown up person simply because they've never terminated you. You got the job when they were

five years old and now they're forty-eight and they still want you around. Not that they're going to tell anyone about it. It's like the adult thumb suckers. Grown men and women, they come home, put some early Tom Waits on the stereo, pick up *The London Review of Books* and slurp, in it goes.

But the time I'm going to tell you about, the client was a kid. Six years of age. Name of Simon. And I'm Stoffard. No, I have no idea either. They make them up a lot of the time, or it's something they've overheard or heard wrong. One time I was Mercy because the kid had been to France. It's not always a freaky name, sometimes we're something absolutely blah like Dave or Chantelle, but a lot of the time, when it comes to naming an IF (as we refer to ourselves) kids really use their imagination.

Simon was a genuinely nice individual. He had a soft heart for a kid, and believe me that's pretty unusual. Whatever you think about kids I can guarantee that you don't see the darkness in them like we do. Most kids are like Hannibal Lecter on a bad day except they wouldn't bother to cook your liver with some beans, they'd eat it raw in the blink of an eye.

But Simon was nice, and he didn't have many reasons to be. He took a lot of shit from the other little kids at school and also from some of the teachers, too. His mother did the best that someone who wakes up crying and has vodka for breakfast can do, which isn't a lot, and his father wasn't around much, and when he was he made life even worse for everyone because he was a giant yodelling dick. Strangely enough he had an IF, too. The first time I saw the dad, I noticed an elderly dude beside him who looked like he'd prefer to be somewhere else. We're not allowed to communicate, and if we try we're in big trouble (which is what this story is about, actually), but whenever the father showed up I gave the IF a sympathetic little nod, and he rolled his eyes at me. He seemed pretty cheerful under the circumstances. I think he knew his contract didn't have long to run, because what the mother drank by the glass the father took by the bottle, in addition to being a world-class drug abuser. And sure enough, he OD'd when I'd been with Simon about three months, and damn if the boy wasn't heartbroken. But a dad is a dad, even if he's a turd. I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to the IF, and I never caught his name.

Simon was more messed up than ever after his father checked out but he never lost his sweet nature. Most of the time in this job you're like the Victorian urchin who gets invited to the lonely rich kid's mansion to play games that the rich kid always has to win.

But Simon was different. He used to invent illnesses for me just so he could be extra kind to me. I was frequently afflicted with a rare but curable virus, and I was very accident prone. I often had sprains, fractures, bruises and minor cuts, and Simon took great care of me. I also developed a cold I couldn't shake, and it required constant attention and sympathy. You didn't have to be a shrink to see the kid wanted someone to love.

The new family that moved in next door seemed pretty normal. Two parents, two kids, one granny, one dog; no alcoholics, no junkies, no shy, awkward uncles who turn out to be killing local prostitutes with a sash weight. But there's no such thing as a normal family: in every apple there's a worm, and in every jar of Vaseline, someone else's pubic hair. So, while the prospect of happiness looked better on their side of the fence than on Simon's, the roses in that garden had thorns as sharp as any others. But the thorns came later.

What came first was Michelle. She was the same age as Simon and she was a knockout. The first time Simon saw her she was standing in front of her new house and pointing out her bedroom window to a big old stuffed giraffe that she'd just dragged out of the removal van. Maybe the giraffe wasn't paying attention, because Michelle poked him in the neck and spoke very sternly to him, but then she broke into a giant, goofy smile, and gave him a big hug. I noticed that Simon was holding his breath, then he let it out with a quiet little gasp when Michelle administered the hug. He didn't stand a chance.

And neither did I, because the other thing I noticed was Jazzinka. I only found out she was called Jazzinka later, when Michelle told Simon all about her IF, and Simon told Michelle all about me, when they were camping in the African jungle, under an old blanket slung across the clothes line in her back garden and pegged into the grass with kebab skewers. That was a lovely afternoon. The sun was shining through the holes in the blanket and it was hot inside that little tent. Jazzinka and I were huddled in there, too, of course. We smiled at each other as we inhaled the smell of fungus and mothballs from the blanket, mingled with the warm aroma of two sweaty, grubby little six-year-old bodies: the scent of innocence with the faintest tang of pee. We smiled, and we shouldn't even have been acknowledging each other's existence. We knew it would end badly but we couldn't do anything about it by then.

I think Simon and Michelle sensed what was happening with me and Jazzinka. Or maybe they were making it happen. It's hard to tell. I can't really get into the

existential issues here. Yes, people invent their imaginary friends, but I also have a life of my own. Think of it as a collaboration. But if you want something to chew on, chew on this: if I'm your imaginary friend, my friend, whose imaginary friend are you?

Jazzinka was tall and dark and slender with lovely cool grey eyes that were also blue or brown. Her skin rippled and changed colour and she moved like a mythical bird or a snake or a schoolgirl. I was less well defined. Where she was changeable, I was merely unfinished. Simon preferred me to be vague. I think it wasn't me he liked so much as the idea of me. Maybe it was the idea of me that Jazzinka liked, too. I don't know. But love will find a way, and so did we.

We both knew we were heading for disaster. What we were doing just wasn't permitted. The laws of nature, logic, and possibility are pretty flexible, to tell you the truth, but our code of ethics isn't. At the very least we risked an Intervention. We would be terminated without prejudice to the client, who would wake up one day with no memory of having an IF. Either they would get a new one, or they wouldn't, it was up to them. Meanwhile the offending IF would have a long time to think it over, in a very lonely place, before even being considered for another contract.

Jazzinka and I didn't know what to do. We considered telling Michelle and Simon that we wanted to quit, asking their blessing, and running away to... where? We didn't know what would happen if we tried to live independently of a client, or even if we could do it at all. Maybe we'd die. I don't mean die like being terminated, which is more like ending a job, going to sleep, then starting a new job, during which you gradually remember the previous job. I mean die.

But we made up our minds to risk it. We had to be together, and we couldn't wait for Simon and Michelle to come up with the idea, although they'd get around to it eventually. Michelle would say, hey, why don't Stoffard and Jazzinka get married? And Simon would love it. He'd chuckle, and start digging a hole to bury wedding presents in. But whatever they imagined marriage to entail, I was pretty sure it wouldn't include the kind of conjugal intimacy that Jazzinka and I had in mind. And how could we tell them? They were six years old. There was only one thing for it: we had to run. But before we even started, events overtook us.

It was all because of the dog, although it wasn't her fault. She was a yappy little thing about the size of a squirrel, and Michelle's mother only bought her to annoy her

husband. He retaliated by pretending to adore the animal so he could pay it more attention than he paid his wife. It was that kind of marriage. They worked hard to make everything look perfect but nothing was right. Michelle's little brother had learning difficulties which they tried to hide, and you can imagine what that did for him. The only thing they had in common was selfishness. The mother was a vain, controlling bitch, and the father was a womanizing pig. That was the main reason Granny was around: to help her daughter keep an eye on him. But lust is like a toxic cloud: it can't be contained and it doesn't discriminate. Michelle's mother may have thought her husband couldn't possibly see anything to attract him in the raddled drunk next door, but what a man like that sees to attract him is simply the opportunity.

Even if Simon's mother had known what she was doing, she still might not have stopped him from seducing her. She was a miserable, lonely, alcoholic widow, and he was a man who wanted her.

He started screwing her within weeks of them moving in. He used to take the dog for a walk, ambling along the street until he knew that Granny couldn't see him any more from behind the lace curtains of her bedroom window, then he'd pick the dog up, phone Simon's mother, race around the block, and come in through the side door of the house. They did it when Simon was at school, or when he was in bed, or sometimes even when he was playing in Michelle's garden.

One evening Simon's mother got the call, so she opened the side door and took off her clothes as usual. When he arrived he was in such a hurry he didn't close the door properly. The dog wandered out, chased a pigeon across the road and got hit by a car. Granny heard the squeal of brakes, the commotion and the voices, hobbled out, saw the dog expiring under the ergonomic front wheel of a Toyota Prius, and followed her suspicious, twitching nose all the way to Simon's mother's bedroom, to be confronted by her son-in-law's blotchy, pumping buttocks.

The family moved out two weeks later. They took Michelle away, and Jazzinka went with her. I thought Simon's little heart would break.

Mine too.

There's no way I can leave Simon now, even if I knew how to find Jazzinka. He needs me more than ever. He doesn't go into the garden much and he spends a lot of time in front of the TV. For the last few weeks he's been watching a series about the history of medicine. So far I've had a touch of bubonic plague, malaria, a nasty bout of

polio, a foot-and-mouth scare, tuberculosis, Ebola virus, hepatitis and bird flu, and now I'm coming down with dengue fever, or Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy, depending on the diagnosis. Simon's looking after me very well, and I'll get over it.

But I won't get over Jazzinka.

Maybe I'll find her again. It won't be any time soon, because it looks like I'll be with Simon for the long haul. I think his mother's heading for an early grave, and his life may not be too much fun for a while. But Simon will endure, and one day he won't need me any more. Then there'll be another job and another client. Then another one after that, and then another. Same with Jazzinka. And maybe, one day, I'll be playing in another sunny garden with another little boy, and we'll notice a little girl who's just moved in next door peeping over the fence, and I'll sense a presence, and then I'll see her.

It could happen.

Anything is possible.